Shabbes in *Ek Velt*: Yiddish Rap Music in Melbourne

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Abstract

This study investigates the worldviews and strategies associated with Yiddish continuity in Melbourne, Australia, with a focus on musical production. It offers a close study of the intergenerational and collaborative model of cultural production behind the Yiddish-language rap in the song, "Shabbes", which appeared on the album, *ZETS! [Smack!]* (2022) by the Melbourne-based band, YID! Using a Jewish cultural studies approach, it considers how the genre of rap expresses Australian legacies of Yiddish, and its deep associations with both family heritage and leftist politics. The interplays between identity and continuity expressed within Yiddish rap suggest a new, youth-oriented iteration of the creative potential of the language and culture within contemporary Jewish Australian life, and more broadly.

Keywords: Jewish youth identity, Jewish rap music, Australia, Jewish cultural continuity, Yiddish language transmission.

Introduction

Over the last three years, participants and observers have celebrated an upsurge in Yiddish activity in Melbourne, Australia, notably in theatre performance, education, and music (Frost 2023; Kaltmann 2020; Maltz 2022; O'Brien 2022). In this article, I investigate the worldview and strategies associated with Yiddish continuity in Australia, affectionately termed '*ek velt* [the end of the world]' by its inhabitants, by considering new music as a compelling outlet for youth-oriented Yiddish creativity. Specifically, I examine the making of original Yiddish-language rap within the collaborative, intergenerational model of Melbourne Yiddish cultural production.

My starting point is an article published in this journal a decade ago by local musicologist Bronia Kornhauser and titled "Music and the Continuity of Yiddish Language and Culture in Melbourne" (Kornhauser 2013). Framing Yiddish as endangered due to its diminishing speaker base, Kornhauser asked: 'As Yiddish, to a large extent, is not being transmitted in the home, is there another option that could help reverse language shift?' (96). Kornhauser embedded her model for Yiddish continuity and language revitalisation within Melbourne's Sholem Aleichem College, a school that teaches the language through the end of primary school. Kornhauser's youth-oriented strategy for

linguistic and cultural transmission proposed teaching Yiddish songs in the classroom and reinforcing that learning in the home. In line with Kornhauser, I propose that singing continues to offer a potent model for multigenerational Yiddish continuity. However, my analysis ten years later is situated within a newly emerging, hybrid in-person/virtual space that spans family, public performance, the recorded album, and new media. As one example, I offer an analysis of the creative process behind the Yiddish song, "Shabbes [Sabbath]", which appeared on the album *ZETS*! *[Smack!]* (2022) by the Melbourne-based band, YID! I focus on the song's rap, a musical genre often associated with social critique and identity politics, as way of interrogating how cross-generational production in a heritage language expresses a specifically Australian orientation towards cultural continuity. I conclude by briefly discussing the Yiddish rap practices of an emerging Melbourne artist, Mia Borowitz.

This study contributes to an emerging Australian subfield of Jewish cultural studies, which suggests that study of cultural expression—including storytelling, visual art, dance, music, theatre, or ritual—'decodes meaning about Jewishness that is created and received by different groups in various situations' (Bronner 2021, 5). Scholars have laid the foundation for the history and demographic analysis of Australia's Jewish experience (for example, Getzler 1970; H. Rubinstein 1987; W.D. Rubinstein 1987; Rutland 1997, 2005; Markus 2014). However, a far smaller corpus of scholarship examines Australian Jewish cultural output, especially its contemporary iterations (Fagenblat, Landau, & Wolski 2006; Margolis & Slucki 2023; Taft & Markus 2018). Recent studies point to a move away from a predominant orientation of Yiddish cultural studies towards Eastern Europe and North America to include other sites (Burdin 2021; Taft & Markus 2018; Rojanski 2020). Using a Jewish cultural studies approach, I consider how the genre of rap expresses Melbourne's legacies of Yiddish, and its multi-layered associations with both family heritage and leftist politics. I posit that interplays between identity and continuity expressed by the vocal style of rap suggest a new iteration of the creative potential of the language and culture within contemporary Jewish Australian life, as well as further afield.

The semiotics of Yiddish in Melbourne

As a thousand-year-old carrier of Ashkenazi Jewish civilisation, the Yiddish historic homeland in Eastern Europe expanded to newer immigrant centres, such as Australia, during the displacement and dislocation of its speakers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Within these upheavals, the enduring resilience of Yiddish creativity offered a vehicle for Jewish cultural survival (King 2001). In the aftermath of the Holocaust, Yiddish shifted from a mass to a niche language; dispersed outside of Eastern Europe with fluctuating centres; and increasingly acquired voluntarily in adulthood, oftentimes to express opposition to dominant religious, cultural, or political beliefs

(Shandler 2020, 189). Even as most of its traditional speakers and their descendants worldwide adopted other languages, Yiddish has evinced continuity within a transnational and virtual 'metalinguistic community' (Avineri 2014), where Yiddish offers a vehicle for creativity and identity politics among enthusiasts and new speakers, both Jewish and non-Jewish. In its 'postvernacular' mode (Kuznitz 2002; Shandler 2005), Yiddish operates as a 'signified' (a subject onto itself) rather than a 'signifier' (mode of communication) (Glaser 2017). Yiddish has also come to form an integral component of a Jewish linguistic repertoire in America, as well as elsewhere, in the embedding of borrowings, syntactical features, accent, or intonation in other languages, which can function to index identity (Benor 2011, 2022). Yiddish also serves as the first and daily language of hundreds of thousands of Hasidic speakers, for whom it marks a connection with traditional Eastern Europe and a boundary against the mainstream (Katz 2019). The 2019 Coronavirus pandemic has boosted a virtual Yiddishverse supported by new media such as videoconferencing technologies and social media (Margolis 2021).

Outside of Hasidic communities, most of the world's Yiddish speakers engage with Yiddish within specific, chosen settings, while operating in another language as their primary vernacular. Abigail Wood applies the term 'heterotopic Yiddishland' to the spaces—classrooms, immersive summer programs, music festivals, and retreats—where the language and culture are performed and enacted (Wood 2013, 47). My study, *Yiddish Lives On* (Margolis 2023), applies the term 'created language spaces' for engagement with the language within settings that are participatory, inclusive, and meaningful. Increasingly, a global Yiddishland comprises new learners of the language, as well as speakers without a family or heritage connection, who gravitate towards the language as part of an interest in cultural production, its leftist political heritage, or identity politics.

Yiddish in Melbourne evinces a collective continuity that is both familial and institutional. The city's Yiddish experience has been shaped by the wider history of European settlement in the country, its remote location, and its immigration story. Most of Melbourne's Jewish population traces its roots to the post-war arrival of Holocaust survivors, which swelled the country's Jewish population from some 24,000 in 1933 to over 60,000 by 1961 (Rutland 2005). The city remains home to the largest per capita population of Holocaust survivors outside Israel. While the dominant Jewish language in the country over the last 70 years has increasingly become Hebrew, Yiddish has maintained a stronghold in Melbourne. According to the 2021 Australian census, some 1,300 people in that city 'use' (rather than 'speak') Yiddish at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). This statistic does not account for the far larger number who employ the language in other ways.

Within a multifaceted transnational Yiddishland, Melbourne Yiddish cultural life manifests an enduring intergenerational continuity and orientation towards youth that set it apart. While the city has not been immune to the decline of Yiddish as a mainstream Jewish vernacular, the language has been transmitted within a cohort of families across multiple generations. The leftist Jewish Labour Bund (founded in Vilnius in 1897), which historically offered a stronghold for Yiddish language and culture worldwide, remains a hub for Yiddish youth activity in Melbourne. Since 1950, the city has housed the world's only extant chapter of the Bund's youth arm, known as SKIF (Sotsyalistisher Kinder Farband [Socialist Children's Union]), which operates youth-led weekly activities and overnight camps (Slucki 2012). The theatre of the Kadimah Jewish Cultural Centre and National Library (founded 1911) has hosted musical and dramatic performances by and for adults as well as children (Burstin 2006). In addition to offering formal Yiddish children's day school education since 1975, Sholem Aleichem College coordinates a high school program (Singer 2019).

Over the last decades, Yiddish music has formed a global space of tremendous youth-oriented vitality. One locus is klezmer music, which developed as a world music genre in the 1970s when American-raised musicians rediscovered an eastern European Jewish tradition of instrumental music, which they paired with Yiddish lyrics from folksongs, musical theatre, or poetry. Over the last five decades, an idiosyncratic repertoire of new Yiddish music has evolved to encompass the genres of jazz, electropop, punk, metal, hip hop, and others. It is performed live, recorded, workshopped at music festivals, and distributed via new media, with an upsurge in online production and dissemination in both the secular and Hasidic spheres. The Yiddish repertoire includes a growing corpus of original song lyrics newly composed in Yiddish by native speakers, native listeners, or new learners. Within Melbourne's youth-oriented infrastructure, young artists are innovating a distinctive brand of Yiddish musical performance. For example, the singer-songwriter Husky Gawenda and his cousin, the pianist-composer Gideon Preiss (both native listeners), have adapted the Indie folk-rock style of their band, Husky (founded 2007), to a Yiddish band called The Bashevis Singers (founded 2016 with Evie Gawenda). In 2021, vocalist Galit Klas (a new learner of Yiddish) and electronica artist Josh Abrahams (also known as Puretone) performed as an avant-garde electronic duo called Durkh a Modne Gloz [Through a Strange Lens].

Margaret Taft and Andrew Markus's *A Second Chance: The Making of Yiddish Melbourne* (Taft & Markus 2018) traces the trajectory of Yiddish continuity among the generations since the post-Holocaust mass migration. Within the first generation of European-born Yiddish speakers, they find an 'imperative to nurture distinctiveness, sustain a sense of community, and promote cultural maintenance and generational transmission' (226). In the second generation, they suggest an 'emotional attachment to a cultural

heritage that is no longer language-based' but instead hinges on idioms, expressions, artefacts (287); a Yiddish-based popular culture, they suggest, grew increasingly dependent on performance and translation (289). Underscoring the fact that proficiency in the language has declined across the generations, they question its continued relevance for the third- and fourth-generation descendants of its traditional speakers (298). Esther Singer's sociolinguistic study of Yiddish in Melbourne suggests that rather than perceiving language shift in the city as a linear transition to the dominant language of English, its speakers envision diverse functions for the language and express optimism about its future as a living language among young people (Singer 2019). My analysis suggests that this optimism is shared by Melbourne's young musical artists.

Analysis of the "Shabbes" rap
The band YID! [JEW!] was formed in 2016 after the return of its instigator, the musician Simon Starr, from a period of living abroad in Israel. Energised by that country's vibrant music scene, Starr sought to seed experimental projects in his native Melbourne. Starr's longtime friend, the guitarist Willy Zygier (collaborator and partner of the Australian rock icon Deborah Conway), suggested the idea of a Yiddish Big Band, which Starr proposed to an array of local musicians, all of whom agreed to participate; the original band had 28 members. In response to the question, Why Yiddish?, Starr responded in an interview, 'If something's slightly provocative or confrontational I am attracted to it. So, I liked the idea of speaking our mind in Yiddish' (Margolis 2022). The local writer Tali Lavi observed, 'The band's name reappropriates an antisemitic slur, the exclamation mark bearing testimony to its joyous exuberance and volume' (Lavi 2023). A year after their debut performance in March 2017 at the annual "In eyn kol/In One Voice" Melbourne Jewish community festival, YID! released their first album, *Space Klezmer*. Over a period of two years, YID! experimented with musical arrangements in preparation for their sophomore album, *ZETS*!, including repeat performances at the WOMAD (WoMAdelaide) music festival. In addition to multiple live performances, the album content was disseminated across multiple formats, including music CD and digital album, as well as on streaming platforms.[1]

ZETS! is profoundly collaborative in process as well as in content. The tracks were composed by YID! co-leaders Simon Starr and William Zygier, Gideon Preiss, and Husky Gawenda together with his parents, Anne and Michael Gawenda. The album was recorded live over two days in April 2021 at the historic Allan Eaton's Studio, St. Kilda, Melbourne, during a brief hiatus between the city's repeat Coronavirus pandemic lockdowns, which were among the most stringent in the world. In attendance at the recording sessions were some 30 musicians and vocalists, a senior Yiddish advisor (Danielle Charak), and multiple observers (including the author of this paper).

The event was afforded a monumental, community spirit by Starr's introductory toast to launch the day; Starr's partner catered the sessions, and everyone in attendance enjoyed a festive shared lunch. Following the live recording, the album was edited and mixed by the album producers, the Kvetch (Yiddish for 'complaining') Brothers, Simon Starr, and Josh Abrahams, during a subsequent period of lockdowns, where they integrated musical samples taken from dozens of Yiddish records. The resulting album differed significantly in sound and feel to the original live recordings.

The album's contents are eclectic. Opening with two overtures, it features adaptations of iconic Yiddish songs (Mark Warshawsky, 1840-1907, "Oyfn Pripetshik" and Aaron Lebedeff, 1873-1960, "Rumenie"), original settings of Yiddish poetry ("Fun Tehilim"), as well as adaptations of traditional songs ("Shabbes"). Original Yiddish spoken-word poetry by Tomi Kalinski introduces the tracks. The musical genres encompass Indie-Folk, Weimar-Republic Cabaret, Free Jazz, 1970s funk, rock, Big Band, and hip hop. The tracks range from pensive to eminently danceable. In the tradition of Pink Floyd's rock opera, *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973), *ZETS!* concludes with a reprise of "Fun Tehilim" performed live by some 60 children from three local choirs.[2]

The final track on the album before the reprise, "Shabbes", is based on a folklore song, "Zol Zayn Shabes", which has no known composer. The song expresses a wish for it to be the Sabbath all over the world in its Ashkenazi iteration expressed in folklore and literature, where that day represents not only a weekly respite but a taste of paradise to come. The song has been widely performed by singers over the generations, who contribute their own lyrics:

> *Shabes, shabes! zol zayn, zol zayn shabes!*
> The Sabbath, let it be the Sabbath!
> *Yontef, yontef! zol zayn, zol zayn yontef!*
> A holiday, let it be a holiday!
> *Sholem, sholem! zol zayn, zol zayn sholem!*
> Peace, let there be peace![3]

The open-ended structure allowed YID! both to elaborate on the song's lyrics and introduce a new component in the form of a Yiddish rap.

The track begins with a solitary violin playing the melody, followed by Husky Gawenda's soft rendition of the song's original lyrics with simple acoustic guitar accompaniment. The English transliteration of the original song's lyrics and their translations, both taken from the album liner, read:[4]

> *Shabbes…*
> *Zol zayn yidn Shabbes*

Shabbes zol zayn, Shabbes zol zayn
Shabbes oyf der gantser velt.

[Sabbath, Jews, let there be Sabbath. May there be Sabbath. Sabbath upon the whole world.]

The music then transitions into a rhythmic and more driving pace, backed by synthesisers against a heavy bass beat, and a melodic line with a brass band sound. In contrast, the lyrics continue to be delivered in Gawenda's soft and breathy Indie-folk vocal style, with backing female vocal harmonies provided by performing artists, Sid, Hettie, and Alma Zygier (Willy Zygier's daughters):

Troymen…
Lomir ale troymen
Kholem zol zayn
Troymen zol zayn
Sholem oyf der gantser velt.

[Dreams. Let us all dream. May there be a dream. May there be a dream (sic). Peace upon the whole world.]

Moyre….
Di velt iz ful mit moyre
Halt mayn hant, bruder, shvester
Koyekh oyf der gantser velt.

[Fear. The world is full of fear. Hold my hand, brother, sister. Strength upon the whole world.]

Libe…
Zol zayn zol zayn libe
Libe zol zayn
Shabbes zol zayn
Shabbes oyf der gantser velt.

[Love. Let there be love. May there be love. Let there be Sabbath. Sabbath upon the whole world.]

Goyrl….
Vos vet zayn undzer goyrl?
Goyrl vet zayn,
Shabbes zol zayn
Shabbes oyf der gantser velt.

[Fate. What will be our fate? What will be will be. Let there be Sabbath. Sabbath throughout the world.]

These opening verses express traditional longings: the wish for the day of rest and taste of paradise, a dream for peace in the world, strength in the face of fear, love, and, finally, questions about fate, and a renewed call for the Sabbath.

At the halfway mark, a rap segment breaks with the song in both tone and content. The faced-paced instrumentals transition into a slower beat, with a single electric guitar riff providing sparse instrumental accompaniment. In a slow and deliberate flow that suggests continuity with the song's earlier verses, Gawenda's cadence rhythmically paces the lines in a consistent synchronicity with the measured backing beat:

Zol zayn yidn Shabbes
Makh mir a tshulnt mit heyse bobes
Zets zikh avek, lomir trinken vayn
Lomir redn vegn frayhayt,
Gerekhtikayt un payn.
Gehakte leber, di hekhste libe,
Mir trinken tsu di sonim,
Mir trinken tsu di brider,
Di velt iz meshige, finster un shvarts
Men ken tsebrekhn di beyner
Men ken tsebrekhn dos harts
S'iz a shtinkendike velt,
Ale viln mer gelt
S'iz nisht git!
Ikh gey nisht mit!

Layered on Gawenda's vocal delivery, other voices join in to recite the final words in the lines (for example, *heyse bobes*), as well as the final two lines. A short rhythmic brass interlude, layered with samples from Yiddish records, segments the rap into two parts. Gawenda resumes his delivery, backed with the chorus of voices to punctuate the ends of the lines:

MIR ZAYNEN YID, HERT UNDZER LID!
Ikh vil nisht redn vegn politik
Ikh vil nisht hern dayn alte shtik
Haynt ken zayn a regn,
Morgn a shturem,
Ikh vel zayn dayn shirem, du vest zayn mayn urem
Mir kemfn kseyder, vos iz di sibe?

Der veg tsu moshiakh iz di hekhste libe!
Sholem Aleikhem, madamen un hern,
Di velt iz a pontshke vos shvebt in di shtern…

The song moves into a free-flowing jazz piece, driven by a trombone solo (James Macaulay), and overlaid with Yiddish samples. The track ends with a reprise of the song's opening stanzas, sung by Gawenda.

The content of the rap draws upon the city's longstanding leftist associations with the language, notably through the Bund and its SKIF youth arm. What follows is the English translation, taken from the album liner notes:

Jews, may there be Sabbath
Make me a stew with hot beans
Sit yourself down, let's drink some wine
Let's talk about freedom
Justice and pain
Chopped liver, a Love Supreme
We drink to our enemies
We drink to our brothers and sisters
The world is mad, dark and black
It can break your bones
It can break your heart
It's a stinky world
Everybody wants more money
It's not good!
I'm not going along with it

WE ARE YID! HEAR OUR SONG!
I don't want to talk about politics
I don't want to hear your old shtick
Today it could rain, tomorrow a storm
I'll be your umbrella, you'll be my arm
We're fighting all the time, what's the reason?
The road to salvation is a Love Supreme
Peace upon you Ladies and Gentlemen,
The world is a doughnut, floating through the stars.

The rap merges Yiddish cultural references (for example, '*tshulnt*' for 'stew'), wordplays, and calls for social justice and a better world. However, the medium—the rhythm and rhyme—within the original Yiddish are as significant as the message, and much is lost in translation. It should be noted that the English translation appears more tongue-in cheek than the original Yiddish, which juxtaposes the whimsical alongside its more serious elements. For example, the line, '*Gehakte leber, di hekhste libe*', is rendered as

'Chopped liver, a Love Supreme' rather than the more literal meaning of 'Chopped liver, the highest love'. The collaborative process behind the rap, which I discuss within scholarship of Jewish rap, reveals much about its meaning.

"Shabbes" within Jewish rap

"Shabbes" both intersects with, and diverges from, a subgenre of Jewish rap that has evolved in the United States and Israel. These parallels and differences suggest some of the characteristics of Australian Yiddish culture in Melbourne, which has emerged from a distinct history and associations with the language.

Rap is a performed or chanted style of vocal delivery with its origin among young urban African American artists, which forms part of a genre that became known as hip hop. The origins date to the 1970s, when disc jockeys (DJs) performed at New York City block parties for local urban communities comprising predominantly African American youth. Rap crossed over into a mainstream American musical genre in the late 1980s. The success of the song "Walk This Way" in 1986, by Run DMC featuring Aerosmith, shifted rap from a percussive, minimalist style associated with racial politics and 'a sonic symbol for poor African American urban youth' to a pop genre with broad mass appeal among upper- and middle-class audiences (Coddington 2018, 3-5). That same year, the Beastie Boys' debut hip hop album, *Licensed to Ill*, became the first rap LP to reach number one on the Billboard charts. While it has maintained a close identification with African American culture, the rap genre has been adopted by artists globally to varying ends. Since the 1980s, a sub-genre of Jewish rap has deployed it for the purposes of parody, social critique, interrogation of Jewish identity, or education.

Within its American context, Leonard Stein (2019) traces prominent Jewish involvement in the hip hop industry in three areas: as producers and managers of pioneering artists and bands; as performers who brought hip hop to mainstream audiences, beginning with the Beastie Boys in the mid-1980s; and in the development of sampling practices. He suggests that from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, artists within a Jewish-oriented rap scene 'approach music as a way of articulating their own understandings of Jewishness' (Stein 2019, 120). Jon Stratton suggests, 'For Jews, parody is a symptom of the Jewish experience in modernity' (Stratton 2016, 68). Examples of rap as Jewish parody abound beginning in the 1980s, ranging from modern Orthodox parodies (for example, Purim plays) to self-parody in the Beastie Boys (Cohen 2009, 5). Stein suggests that the Beastie Boys 'rose to hip-hop stardom in the 1980s by stressing an ambiguous position toward their whiteness as rappers and bringing in a mainstream white audience to hip-hop by not recording about their heritage' (Stein 2019, 120-121). Stratton further argues that, as upper middle class Jewish New Yorkers, the Beastie Boys 'took

on a role typical of Jewish entertainers in the United States for almost a century, that of mediating between African-American music and a white audience' (Stratton 2008, 414). Further, Stratton situates the group's voice of incivility and preoccupation with masculinity within broader American Jewish cultural trends (429). The American Jewish rappers undercut the association between rap and rugged hypermasculinity. Perhaps the best example is Lil Dicky, a self-deprecating and self-emasculating millennial Ashkenazi Jewish American rapper.

In Israel, where rap became mainstream at the turn of the millennium, the genre is multifaceted rather than associated with any one point of view. Uri Dorchin suggests that, in Israeli rap, the *how* outweighs the *what*, with 'meaning, sincerity, unique personality and viability' as key attributes in contrast to the genre of pop (Dorchin 2015, 459). A central tenet of rap is 'Dugri'—action-oriented, inclusive 'straight talk'—in an extension of a valued character of Israeli discourse (461). Dorchin concludes that for diverse rappers playing to heterogenic audiences, 'making a message and being true is the sole meta-message that consistently binds rappers the world over into a cohesive style community' (469).

Rap music—non-Jewish and Jewish—is bound up with interrogating collective memory. Jarula M.I. Wegner applies Michel Foucault's concept of countermemory to rap music: 'countermemory is a memory related to and in opposition to a memory that attracts veneration, identification, or absolute truth claims. It aims at disowning this past by creating a discontinuity between the past remembered and the present of remembering' (Wegner 2020, 1222). The four features of countermemory—relational, relating a mythical past to recent past or present, suggesting alliances and transcultural negotiations, and ranging from moderate to radical 'memory opposition' (1229)—challenge and reconstruct the status quo in an active way. Whether based on fact or fiction, constructive or destructive, reactionary, or progressive, countermemory demands a response. For example, the 1980s rap track by Brother D with Collective Effort, "How We Gonna Makes the Black Nation Rise?", commands action within a community of listeners dedicated to revolutionary ideas in the repeated lyrics: 'Agitate! Educate! Organise!' (1223-4). Remedy's track, "Never Again" (1998), offers a Jewish example. Performed by a Jewish artist, the rap about the Holocaust, which samples *Schindler's List*, was performed as part of the Wu-Tang Clan, a hip hop/rap collective formed in New York in the early 1990s. Wegner writes, 'the chorus connects different pasts and enables transcultural alliances when they jointly claim, "Never again!"' (1225). The 'suggested subaltern alliance' stems from a recognition of shared suffering among the group's Jewish and African American members (1226).

Significantly, these characteristics of Jewish rap are not at play in "Shabbes". The track is not a parody or self-parody, nor does it offer social commentary or purport to demonstrate authentic and straight speech. The

"Shabbes" rap does not suggest countermemory or call for revolution or transcultural alliances. It contains no explicit references to specific events or demand action. A single possible exception is the single line, '*mir zaynen yid, her undzer lid!* [We are YID! Hear our song!]'. In a live performance at the 2020 'In eyn kol/In One Voice' Melbourne Jewish community festival, this line was met with jubilance from a wildly dancing crowd of SKIF youth group members (known as 'Skifistn'). However, it is worth noting that even if the lyrics did demand revolutionary action, most of the song's listeners of the live or recorded track lack the linguistic fluency to decipher it.

A corpus of American Yiddish-language protest songs offers another potential musical influence on the "Shabbes" rap. These include musical adaptations of poems by the New York sweat shop poets originally sung during strikes for better factory conditions a century ago and remaining popular in the Yiddish repertoire. For example, Morris Rosenfeld's "Mayn Rue Plats [My Resting Place]" has been recorded multiple times over recent decades (Dvorin 2000). Another potential influence is the genre of political folk revival of the 1960s, which refashioned Yiddish songs. One example are the adaptations of Sholem Secunda and Aaron Zeitlin's theatre song about a calf being led to slaughter, published in 1941 as "Dos Kelbl [The Calf]" and later popularised as "Donna Donna"; the folksinger and activist Joan Baez's English-language rendition in her eponymous 1960 album was widely performed within the human rights movement of that time. However, "Shabbes" does not reference these songs or their protest traditions.

Instead, "Shabbes" forms part of a smaller subset of Jewish rap that emerged in Yiddish among young artists for whom it is a heritage language but not spoken as a vernacular. Here, rap combined with sampling practices offers a space in which to interrogate contemporary Jewish identity in conversation with the past. In 2003, musicians Sophie Solomon and SoCalled (Josh Dolgin) produced a pioneering fusion between hip hop and klezmer on their album, *Hiphopkhasene*. The track "(Alt. Shul) Kale Bazetsn [Seating the Bride]" features two original spoken-word texts: Old World Yiddish-language *badkhones* (the rhymes of the wedding jester, intended to bring the bride and guests to tears), and an English-language rap. Both texts respond to, and subvert, their genres. The Yiddish *badkhones,* written and delivered by native speaker Michael Alpert, draw upon a traditional repertoire of Yiddish musicians' argot to demand that the bride *not* cry (Wood 2007; Margolis 2011). Dolgin rapping in English as DJ SoCalled disrupts the contemporary genre of the hip hop 'diss track', where artists attack their rivals in rap. Rather than dissing a competitor, SoCalled disses the institution of heteronormative marriage: 'economic solution to socialized absolution / Hype the hetero norms, yo, it's just ancient psychic residuals' (Margolis 2011). Although he studied Yiddish in university, SoCalled opted for his native tongue of English; his authenticity lay in representing his voice as a hip hop artist in English, as he revealed in an interview: 'I do not speak Yiddish, and I think rap should be

in a language that you actually speak' (Smulyan 2008, 4). On his subsequent album, *Ghettoblaster* (2007), SoCalled integrates another English rap into the Yiddish track, "(Rock the) Belz", this time to contrast the childhood nostalgia of the *shtetl* expressed in the 1937 Yiddish theatre song "Mein Shtetele Belz [My Shtetl Belz]" (Alexander Olshanetsky and Jacob Jacobs) with his own experience of growing up in suburban Canada in the late twentieth century. The track layers samples of the song as recorded by Broadway veteran Theodore Bikel, and a rap by French-Canadian hip hop artist Teah (now One8Tea). As Stratton suggests, for SoCalled, 'the samples bring the past into the present and, in the process, reconstitute the past as the present is made' (Stratton 2016, 67).

The layering or 'scavenger aesthetic' (Wood 2007, 262) associated with hip hop figures front and centre in the "Shabbes" rap. The album taps into Yiddish as means of forging new temporalities that engage music with collective memory. Tradition is aligned with modernity in both form and content. Stratton's study of sampling practices and Jewishness (Stratton 2016) aligns the prominence and the innovation of Jewish samplers with religious as well as secular Ashkenazi ways of thinking that conceptualise the world as a process of ingathering, recombination, and unification of fragments after rupture. Stratton locates the Jewish existential significance of sampling within mystical teachings that carry through to the present. Whereas African American samplers integrate sampling into a rap, Jewish samplers evince 'greater preoccupation with using samples in a new textual synthesis' where fragments of the past function in service to the present (Stratton 2016, 58); for example, the extensive experimental sampling in the Beastie Boys' album, *Paul's Boutique* (1989), comprises over a hundred samples in a collage.

The origin story of the *ZETS!* album draws deeply on the Jewish relationship with sampling. In an interview, Starr revealed that a friend who was a fan of the Beastie Boys shared a video with him about the genesis of *Paul's Boutique* and its foundational sampling practices. Inspired to produce a Yiddish sampling album, Starr gathered members of the band, Husky Gawenda and Gideon Preiss, as well as Josh Abrahams and the recording artist Marty Lubrin, to collect all of the Yiddish records they could locate— about 150 in total—and listen to them over several days; Lubrin captured the samples that resonated with the group. The samples were integral to Starr's vision for the album:

> I had in my mind all the time that it was going to end up equal parts the band and the samples. The samples were going to tell as much, if not more, of the story of the songs. It was really important to me that the samples not just be tokenistic and just shoved in somewhere just to prove that we are engaging with modernity somehow, but that they actually drove the song in a significant way. (Margolis 2022).

The "Shabbes" rap encompasses multiple voices in the sampling as well as the lyrics. Wood suggests, 'The hiphop medium has frequently been

appropriated by other groups seeking to express a cultural—and frequently countercultural—identity via the combination of layers of contrasting materials. The plurivocality engendered by this semantic layering is another core aesthetic of hiphop' (Wood 2007, 262). Starr remarks that in aligning electronica and traditional klezmer instruments (violin, trumpet, piano) throughout the *ZETS!* album, 'there is a foot in the past and a foot in the future' (Margolis 2022).

Whereas, two decades ago, Josh Dolgin as SoCalled rapped in his dominant language of English, Husky Gawenda determined a collaborative process to generate Yiddish lyrics without fluency in the language. The "Shabbes" rap offers an example of a hybrid mode: original lyrics composed in Yiddish by a collective with varying degrees of facility and fluency in the language. Rap, which entails lines held together by a beat rather than a narrative, is well suited to this collaborative, patchwork process.

The "Shabbes" model of Yiddish creativity

"Shabbes" offers an intergenerational model for Yiddish songwriting in the rap genre. The project encompassed two generations—Husky and his parents—generating the lines together, always working in Yiddish. Michael Gawenda was born in an Austrian displaced persons' camp to parents from Lodz, and Anne Gawenda was born in post-war Poland. Both grew up in Melbourne as native speakers of Yiddish and have been active as producers of Yiddish-language culture, Michael as a Yiddish poet and Anne as a Yiddish teacher at the Sholem Aleichem College. Husky is a native listener who heard Yiddish from his grandparents, learned it formally at the Sholem Aleichem College, and employs the language within creative projects.

The "Shabbes" collaboration began with Starr's suggestion that the song contain a rap. Starr provided the beat as well as a general direction for its content. Starr envisioned the rap:

> with the spirit of Yiddish poetry and the spirit of creation that a lot of Yiddish literature originated which I consider closer to the way that Aboriginal people talk about the Dreaming and the Dreamtime. There's a personal relationship with God, a sense of tragedy that's happened to the Jews, with a humour about it. It's sort of a world-weary acceptance of it, and then there's a passionate embrace of progressive politics of how to fix it. (Margolis 2022)

During an interview held two weeks after the album's recording session, Husky, Anne, and Michael Gawenda shared the details behind the mode of Yiddish composition for the rap (personal communication, 21 April 2021). Husky recalled the genesis of the rap as Simon Starr's directive for a vibe about the current state of the world and spreading love in response.

Not being fluent enough in Yiddish to write the rap alone, Husky approached his parents, Anne and Michael, with whom he had previously worked across multiple Yiddish projects. Anne's involvement with The

Bashevis Singers and YID! included correcting the singers' pronunciation, as well as composing original translations of songs into Yiddish.[5] An earlier collaboration, "Far Dir a Lid", released on The Bashevis Singers' eponymous first album (2016), laid the foundation for the method that would yield the "Shabbes" rap. That album consisted of interpretations of Yiddish folk and theatre songs as part of a passion project for the band's collaborators; the band's 'About' webpage introduces the band's members as 'the children of generations of people who lived their lives in Yiddish,' and concludes, 'In The Bashevis Singers, the chain of Yiddish is unbroken' (The Bashevis Singers, n.d.). Two songs with original Yiddish lyrics and music are the product of a partnership between Husky and Michael. The songs originated during a single month-long period where Michael composed a series of Yiddish poems that reflect upon his family heritage and growing up in a Yiddish-speaking home. A distinguished Australian writer, Michael was best known for his English-language journalism and non-fiction writing. However, the Yiddish poems came to him spontaneously in a finite period of intensive Yiddish writing. Michael shared the poetry with Husky, who felt compelled to create music for two of the songs: "Far Dir a Lid [A Song for You]" and "Troymen [Dreams]". A media article about the project is aptly titled "Two of Us: 'Dad's Yiddish Poems Revealed a Part of Him I Didn't Know'" (Marshall 2018). I briefly examine the former as a counterpoint to "Shabbes".

"Far Dir a Lid" turns backwards to Michael's memories of his parents, both of whom were Yiddish speakers who settled in Melbourne after the Holocaust. His poem portrays Yiddish as an enduring connection to his parents, who since passed away. The song opens, as per the album liner notes:[6]

> *Far dir a lid tateshi in Yiddish lang avek*
> *Fun mir nor in mayn harts bistu in Yiddish do a*
> *Lid fun mayn zikorn mit dir in mayne kinder yorn.*
>
> *Un du mayn mameshi elnt un aleyn in der*
> *Fargangenheyt lang avek un nokh eyn vort in*
> *Yiddish hob ikh gehut mameshi genug geven far*
> *Mir mayn mameshi.*
>
> A song for you my father dear, in Yiddish which
> is long forgotten in me, but in my heart you are
> there, in Yiddish you are there, a song from my
> memory with you in my childhood years.
>
> And you my mother dear, lonely and alone in
> the past long gone, when I had only one word in
> Yiddish, one word… mother, that was enough for

me, that was enough for you, my mother.

The poem assumes the voice of a child, whose family language was Yiddish. Yiddish was the tongue in which he first named his parents, and it is the tongue in which he now memorialises them. It is a language of quiet and intimate remembrance. Husky and his sister, Evie, perform the song in soft harmonies with acoustic accompaniment on guitar, piano and cello. Another song on The Bashevis Singers' album, "Nor a Mame [Only a Mother]", evinces similar deep familial connections. That track opens with singing by Husky and Evie's maternal grandmother, Chaja, whose voice was recorded in a 1930s film, as well as their mother, Anne, and, in the third generation, Evie. The song thus joins three generations of mothers, each of whom sang the same song to their daughters. A media review of the album noted the family's abiding connection to Yiddish as embodied in Evie, Gideon, and Husky:

> All three were raised with a strong Yiddish language culture, both through grandparents who spoke Yiddish to them and through Sholem Aleichem School or Sunday School, where Yiddish is a compulsory subject. They speak passionately—and collectively—about their desire to be true to the original music. (Stone 2018)

Like "Far Dir a Lid", the "Shabbes" rap did not originate in English and does not represent a translation of a source text in another language into Yiddish. Rather, the Yiddish emerged from a process of cross-fertilisation. In our interview, Husky shared their method:

> So I was kind of telling mum what I wanted to say, so I was sort of throwing Yinglish lines at her and dad. And then mum was kind of translating them, and it was kind of, we were coming up with the lines together, I guess. (personal communication, 21 April 2021)

Anne added, 'He doesn't maybe have that fluency in Yiddish, but we don't have that fluency in rap, so, we relied on him completely to say what this should feel like, and to say is this a fitting line for a rap?' At various points in the interview, Husky, Anne and Michael announced who had come up with which lines in the rap. For example, Michael generated the second line, '*Makh mir a tshulnt mit heyse bobes* [Make me a stew with hot beans]', drawing on a song that his parents sang to him as a child, and his sister later sang, about preparing that holiday food. They agreed that the rap was playful, referencing the Beastie Boys as a model. Michael, who was raised in a Bundist home, pointed out that the references to '*frayhayt, gerekhtikayt un payn* [freedom, justice, and pain]' stemmed 'from a million Bund speeches', which yielded knowing laughs from Anne and Husky. Husky shared that the track represented his first foray into rap, a genre of which he is not a fan and which he found challenging in Yiddish. He expressed his perception of Yiddish, which undergirds the rap as well as his broader musical engagement with Yiddish:

I grew up with Yiddish. I have like a deep love for the language. It's the language of my grandparents, some of whom I didn't know at all, and some I didn't know for very long and wish I did. And it's a kind of, it's a language of my parents as well. I was surrounded by it in my younger years when Dad's older sisters were still alive. And very early on, when [Anne's] parents were still alive. And you know, we sat around and they spoke Yiddish, and I understood it. They sang Yiddish, they spoke Yiddish, and I understood it. And it was a world, you know, I had access to this world that you only have access to through Yiddish. And I still feel that way. I still feel that Yiddish is my only way to gain access to that world, the world of my ancestors. Just that whole world that Yiddish opens up. And these Yiddish projects that I'm doing keep the language alive, for me. It's not just about the past. It's about now. It's about what the language is going to do, is going to mean, now, and what it's going to mean in the future. And what it means to those young kids who understand it and love it, and the language is very alive for me. And that's what all those projects do for me. They keep the language alive. (personal communication, 21 April 2021)

Husky specified that the language was a 'language of the heart' for him rather than a political vehicle. He added that his orientation in creating songs in Yiddish was not towards reaching a potential audience, but towards the creation of art. By the same token, he was surprised and gratified to see the response of young people at the band's live concerts:

It excites me that they're connecting with Yiddish, that they're interested in it, that they're speaking it, or singing it, or chanting it with us. Yeah, that excites me. But I can't say that I'm thinking about that, or who the audience is, when I'm doing any of these projects. I just feel like I'm trying to create these great things in Yiddish. And when Yiddish is involved, when I'm touching people and Yiddish is involved, it's a deep experience for me. (personal communication, 21 April 2021)

As a text that originated organically in the Yiddish language rather than as a translation, the "Shabbes" rap does not meet the definition of the transvernacular mode, where Yiddish-language dialogue is reconstructed from a source text in another language for the purposes of performance (Margolis 2016). In "Shabbes", the source text is Yiddish, with the whole song created organically and collaboratively in that language, including the song's stanzas and the rap. The approach to crafting the Yiddish rap is reminiscent of the painstaking process by which mid-nineteenth-century writers constructed prose and poetry in the language that was to become modern literary Hebrew, which entailed gleaning vocabulary from a variety of sources in textual Hebrew and Aramaic to express contemporary contexts (Glinert 2017).

As a natural outgrowth of its collaborative, multigenerational process, the "Shabbes" track evinces linguistic traits that distinguish Melbourne Yiddish. The local variant of the language is informed by the city's post-Holocaust history. Many of the city's speakers, estimated at some 14,000 of a total Jewish population of 20,000 in the 1960s, stemmed from cities and towns where the Polish dialect of the language was spoken. Warsaw looms large in the community's collective memory, with the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (19 April) marking an annual communal Holocaust commemoration where Yiddish is publicly heard (Singer 2019). The "Shabbes" rap reflects how the Polish regional variant (also: Mideastern or Central Yiddish) has carried across the generations into popular culture, notably in the stressed vowel יו that is rendered 'u' (ʊ, 'oo' as in 'foot') in Standard Yiddish (Klal Shprakh) and in the North-eastern/Lithuanian dialect, and 'i' (ɪ, as in 'bid') in the Polish variant, for example, '*meshige*' (for משוגע , as opposed to '*meshuge'*) (see Kleine 2003, Katz 2011). The song's Mideastern pronunciation, as opposed to the use of the Standard Yiddish taught in most secular classrooms, suggests a transmission of native Polish Yiddish dialects across the generations in Melbourne. An idiosyncratic linguistic feature of Melbourne Yiddish is the pronunciation of the word אויף (a preposition with multiple meaning, notably 'on' or 'in') as '*oyf*' (for example, Taft and Markus 2018, 333): '*Shabbes oyf der gantser velt'*. In contrast, this widespread word is pronounced '*af'* or '*uf'* in the Yiddish dialects as well as in Standard Yiddish.

The "Shabbes" rap comprises a composite of phrases and fragments from the collective consciousness of the Gawenda family, whose members bring to the table vastly different experiences of the language. Michael is a native Yiddish speaker and, briefly, a Yiddish poet; Anne is a native speaker and long-time professional Yiddish educator; Husky is a native listener and Yiddish school graduate. Each brought their own poetic sensibility to the text. For example, the final line, '*Di velt iz a pontshke vos shvebt in di shtern…* [the world is a donut that sweeps through the stars]', merged Husky's undergraduate degree in astrophysics and his parents' facility with Yiddish poetry (personal communication, 21 April 2021). The synergy forms the foundation of the rap, which expresses the leftist, Bundist ideologies that undergird the Gawenda family, as well as much of the city's Yiddish activity.

Coda: A Skifist model of Yiddish rap

The "Shabbes" rap suggests an ongoing and multifaceted evolution of Yiddish Melbourne in its third generation of descendants from its last traditional European-born speakers. Even if not spoken on a regular basis, Yiddish offers a direct line to family history and the community values associated with it. The name of the band, YID!, suggests a provocative existential proclamation of hereness, akin to the Bund's core doctrine of *doikayt* [hereness, or nurturing Jewish creativity where Jews live]. Music and art form an integral component

of the Yiddish chain of transmission. By engendering the plurivocality and layering of the hip hop genre, the "Shabbes" rap suggests a new iteration of a specifically Melbournian model for Yiddish continuity in both theory and practice. Three generations after the arrival of the Holocaust survivors, Melbourne Yiddish remains intergenerational, spanning multiple generations who evoke the language in different ways as native speakers, native listeners, or new learners. The political and social legacies associated with Yiddish in the city continue to resound. The process of Yiddish creativity is less about transmitting a whole or authentic Yiddish and more about modes of engaging with the language that remain meaningful and amplify familial or leftist associations. In Melbourne, Yiddish resonates deeply across multiple generations with diverse levels of fluency.

I conclude with the Yiddish rap of Mia Borowitz as an alternative model for Yiddish continuity in Melbourne. The current chairperson [*forzitser*] of SKIF and a fluent speaker, twenty-year-old Borowitz first learned Yiddish at the Sholem Aleichem College. She remarked in a recent media article, 'I'm all about making Yiddish cool, because it is' (Maltz 2022). Borowitz raps in Yiddish as a personal hobby, posting her content on a private Instagram social media account under the ironic name caulfield_mum.[7] As one example, Borowitz's original Yiddish-English rap version of "Tayere Malke [Dear Malke]", posted on 26 May 2023, merges Bundist ideals with a popular Yiddish song. The original, folklorised song by Mark Warshawsky, which celebrates the drinking of wine in the face of adversity across the generations, is traditionally sung at the third Passover *seder* held by leftist organisations such as the American Worker's Circle [Arbeter Ring], as well as SKIF.[8] In the Instagram videorecording, Borowitz's flow suggests a practised ease in the rap genre. The rapid-fire delivery governed by an intricate rhyme scheme occurs in tight synchronicity with the simple backing beat. The rap concludes as follows, with the Polish Yiddish dialect so prevalent in Melbourne and for the sake of the rhyme (*kayt* instead of the Standard Yiddish *keyt*):

> Link me up in *di goldene kayt* [the golden chain]
> Ice me out with bling?
> Nah, with *yidishkayt* [Jewishness]
> A *besere velt* [better world], yeah,
> It's in sight
> I'm a young guard
> fighting for *gerekhtikayt* [justice]!

The rap was delivered to a room of Skifistn, who cheered and enthusiastically chanted Warshawsky's concluding lyrics in a spirited repeated back and forth call with Borowitz:

> Borowitz: *Tayere malke, gezunt zolstu zayn*!
> [Dear Malke, may you be well!]
> Skifistn: *Gis on dem bekher, dem bekher mit vayn!*
> [Fill up the goblet, the goblet with wine!][9]

The excerpt of Borowitz's rap draws on the core values of the Bund, as transmitted to the Melbourne youth in SKIF over the generations. '*Di goldene kayt/keyt*' refers to the 'golden chain' of Jewish tradition; '*yidishkayt* [Jewishness]' represents one of SKIF's three ideologies of *chavershaft* [comradery], *doikayt* [hereness]*,* and *yidishkayt* [Jewishness]. The SKIF website frames *yidishkayt* as the shared heritage of the Jewish people which encompasses an exploration in Yiddish culture in stories and song (SKIF. n.d.). '*A besere velt* [the wish for a better world]' and '*gerekhtikayt* [justice]' likewise represent core Bundist values. Further, as a youth-led, youth-oriented, leftist movement, whose membership encompasses three generations of Yiddish speakers as well as new learners such as Borowitz, SKIF offers a peer-led space for Yiddish intergenerational continuity in Melbourne in the face of language shift outside of family transmission, and outside of formal education.

Like the Gawendas' "Shabbes" rap, Borowitz's "Tayere Malke" blends a popular Yiddish folk(lorised) song with an original rap that expresses a Jewish orientation towards building a better world. However, Borowitz's "Tayere Malke" rap explicitly links the central Bundist ideals in line with core principles of the rap genre. In contrast to the Gawendas' rapped suggestion, '*Lomir redn vegn frayhayt, gerekhtikayt un payn* [Let's talk about freedom, justice and pain]', Borowitz's ironic juxtaposition of 'ice me out with bling' with '*yidishkayt*' evinces social commentary and a 'young guard's' demand for action in alliance with other groups. A fan of rap, Borowitz shares the pride of origin expressed by the subgenre of Gangsta Rap, both linguistically in the use of Yiddish, and thematically in a focus on the here and now (Mia Borowitz, personal communication, 10-11 December 2023). With the language integral to Melbourne's Jewish cultural creativity and identity politics, Yiddish forms a natural conduit for Borowitz's creative process, which expresses itself in bilingual as well as Yiddish-only texts. Although at present, Borowitz's rap is limited to a circle of close community and approved followers on social media, it suggests new scope for music within the ongoing resilience and vitality of Yiddish Melbourne.

In keeping with Kornhauser's findings a decade ago (Kornhauser 2013), this study situates music as a vehicle for Yiddish continuity, this time with a focus on young adults as instigators of creativity. As a group whose Yiddish engagement is less supported institutionally than school-aged children or teenagers, young adults have fewer options for meaningful engagement with the language. As I suggest in *Yiddish Lives On*, 'intergenerational' can refer not only to linguistic transmission within familial

relationships but across cohorts of musicians, educators or within organisations (Margolis 2023, 253-255). I have examined two models for Yiddish creativity in the genre of a rap. The Gawendas' "Shabbes" rap applies a collaborative, multigenerational approach to generating Yiddish cultural production that, in turn, speaks to the younger generation in content accessible via live performance and recordings disseminated via digital album streaming. The immediacy and participatory element of Mia Borowitz's Yiddish-English "Tayere Malke" as an expression of Jewish identity and politics suggests a participatory youth-oriented model of Yiddish continuity moving forward.

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Yosl and Chana Mlotek Yiddish Song Collection at the Worker's Circle, https://yiddishsongs.org

Endnotes

[1] The digital album is available via Bandcamp at https://yidmusic.bandcamp.com/album/zets and Apple Music at https://music.apple.com/us/album/zets/1645331472. The album is available for streaming at no cost on Spotify, https://open.spotify.com/album/5n9jG7RFB3pfEUkHEJk9ef.

[2] The Sholem Aleichem College Choir, the Liron Choir, and the King David School Choir.

[3] "Zol Zayn Shabes" can be found on the Yosl and Chana Mlotek Yiddish Song Collection at the Worker's Circle webpage, https://yiddishsongs.org/zol-zayn-shabes/.

[4] The liner notes also include the original Yiddish, written in the Hebrew alphabet.

[5] Anne Gawenda's Yiddish translation of the Simon and Garfunkel 1970 masterwork "The Boxer", appeared as "Der Boxer" on YID!'s album, *Space Klezmer* (2018).

[6] The liner notes also include the original Yiddish, written in the Hebrew alphabet. See also the video, "Far Dir a Lid" (The Bashevis Singers 2019).
[7] Caulfield is a suburb of Melbourne that is home to a large Jewish population.
[8] For more about the song within the Third Seder, see Milken Archive of Jewish Music, "Third Seder of the Arbeter Ring (excerpts)".
[9] The complete lyrics for "Tayere Malke" can be found on the Yosl and Chana Mlotek Yiddish Song Collection at the Worker's Circle webpage, https://yiddishsongs.org/tayere-malke/.